

Cellphone service aims to put tourists in the picture

Project sees cellphones 'as part of your entertainment system'

BY BRUCE CONSTANTINEAU
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INFORMATION | To Leora Kornfeld, a cellphone is a remote control, and Greater Vancouver is an integrated entertainment system. The co-founder of Vancouver-based Ubiquity Interactive envisions a day when city tourists will visit an attraction like the Gassy Jack statue or Stanley Park totem poles, call a local number, and receive an entertaining, thought-provoking commentary.

The vision already exists on a smaller scale, with Ubiquity providing that service — called MetroCode — for more than 20 sculptures currently on exhibit as part of the 18-month Vancouver Sculpture Biennale. Callers using

the service can also vote for their favourite sculpture and leave their own voice comments.

"A cellphone is usually a device that's only used to make calls, or dodge calls. But our project reimagines the cellphone as a part of your entertainment system," Kornfeld said in an interview. "We see a cellphone as being like a mouse or a remote control that allows you to click on things around you and get the information you want."

Vancouver personalities Ellie Harvie and Richard Side provide the voices for MetroCode, giving information about the artists' inspiration, along with their background and technique — essentially providing the tools for people to experience self-guided tours. Callers simply dial 604-638-2661, and then a combination of digits provided at particular locations to access the commentary.

The MetroCode pilot project is

being funded with federal money as part of a Vancouver-based, industry-driven research initiative called Mobile MUSE (Media-rich Urban Shared Experience), which has a pool of about \$2 million in seed money. The calls themselves are free, for now, although local charges still apply according to various cellphone plans.

Kornfeld, a former CBC radio host who founded Ubiquity in 2002 with Lars Meyer, plans to expand the service in the fall by signing up commercial clients who want to use MetroCode as a marketing and advertising vehicle.

"We want to place [number] codes on attractions like posters, public art, restaurants and various other businesses," she said. "People will phone and get text messaged back with more information or even have video clips sent to their phone."

Kornfeld said the long-term



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MetroCode cellphone tourist information about features like this Bernar Venet sculpture in Vanier Park is the creation of Ubiquity Interactive co-founders Lars Meyer (left) and Leora Kornfeld.

vision is to develop MetroCode as a tourist product for the entire city by 2010.

"People who visit Vancouver for a few days might want to take a tour of Gastown or Queen Elizabeth Park or whatever, and they'll be able to buy the tours in an a-la-carte fashion," she said.

Ubiquity Interactive created a

personal-digital-assistant product last year called VUEguide — launched at the University of B.C. Museum of Anthropology — that allows users to carry a handheld multimedia guide to obtain information about museum exhibits at their own pace while on self-guided tours.

The self-guided-tour concept is

expected to be expanded throughout Greater Vancouver this summer when SkyTrain introduces headsets that tourists will be able to rent so they can hear a guided commentary about the history of certain parts of the Lower Mainland — including New Westminster and Gastown.

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